Introduction Pauline Bryan

**What does the future hold for Scotland?**

We know what to expect from the SNP should it become the first government of an independent Scotland. The Growth commission, endorsed by the SNP membership, gives us some detail. It is based on the simple belief that global capitalism with its free markets and neo-liberal policies is the only possible economic structure for a future Scotland. It would lock Scotland into austerity policies for at least the first decade of independence with appalling consequences for public services and jobs.

The Commission report is committed to retaining sterling as its currency for an undefined future. The Scottish government would not have control of monetary policy so that even if it wanted to stimulate investment and growth it would not be able to. But from the author’s point of view, that wouldn’t matter as he saw no need to adopt a different economic strategy from that of the Tory treasury. The report favours ‘flexicurity’ i.e. no security for workers and competitive taxation policies for business.

We also know what we can expect from the status quo. The SNP Scottish Government will continue to claim success where it believes things have gone well and blame the UK Government where there are problems. It will also try to avoid scrutiny by asking its supporters to see independence as the goal while failing to address the major problems that Scotland faces today.

Status quo means continuing to suffer under one of the most right-wing, authoritarian Tory governments which is introducing legislation that attacks basic rights and freedoms and is directing public money at its friends in big business. For all the scandals and disasters within the government, the Tories are still ahead in the polls.

UK Labour under Keir Starmer has made none of the gains that he promised the membership that voted for him. He is failing to connect with its heartlands. Every strategy that he adopts to reach out to the previously labour supporting areas seems to alienate them more. As things stand, it will be some time before we can factor in a radical Labour government.

In the meantime, we are faced with the centralising, authoritarian, anti-trade union Tories who are prepared to override the devolution settlements. There is no way that we can dress the status quo up as an acceptable offer to people in Scotland.

Polling for the Press and Journal in the run up to the May 2021 elections showed that, although the constitutional question remains important, Scotland’s economy and jobs were more than twice as likely as independence to be mentioned by respondents as top election issues. The impact of the pandemic on education and health services was also of greater concern. This was not however translated into votes.

Another poll taken after the May election showed the country evenly split on whether the result was a mandate for a second referendum. That snapshot of Scottish thinking reflects the worrying state of Scotland. The country is divided almost down the middle. This is a recipe for continuing division and distraction from challenging the policies of both the Tories and the SNP that are failing to challenge poverty, insecure work, low pay, falling life expectancy, inequality in education and so many other problems.

**Rejecting status quo and being sceptical about independence**

Where does it leave the large number of voters who are wary of independence but who do not support the Tory government and certainly not Boris Johnson?

While there may not be a referendum any time soon it is still sucking the air out of politics.

The Red Paper Collective believes that one way to tackle the problem is to have a clear agreement now that should there be a future referendum it will be on the basis of three options; status quo, radical change short of independence and independence. It hopes to participate in a coalition for change with those in political and trade union movements that accept that there is a clear democratic case for a third option to be on any ballot paper and that forcing voters to choose between two extremes of the spectrum is blatantly unfair.

Independence once voted for can’t be undone. The status quo does allow the possibility of change in the future but endorsing it would be repellent to many working people. We should be able to say ‘yes we want change’, without that meaning we have to say ‘yes to independence’. Unless that third option is clearly defined, we cannot expect voters to entertain it. To make it a viable radical alternative, it has to be written by socialists. The Red Paper Collective wants to play its part in that process.

With a clear vision for the third option we can actually begin to demand those changes that don’t require new powers to be acted on now. We should remove the excuse that the Scottish government has to wait for independence before it can deliver by campaigning for those changes that can be introduced now.

There is a clear model for a three-option referendum which has been used in many countries. Professor James Mitchell of Edinburgh University argues: ‘A third option must be on the ballot paper in any future referendum if we are truly to understand the views and aspirations of the Scottish people. Instead of one simple binary option, the question of whether people want change could be asked, and then, assuming an affirmative vote, two change options would be offered, independence or more powers. This broadens choice and avoids forcing voters to choose between the lesser of two evils.’

The recent STUC General Council statement has recognised the right of the Scottish Parliament to call a referendum but questions the limited binary (Yes/No to independence) choice and asks for explorations of a third option. The STUC has produced a plan called *The People’s Recovery* which points to some of the changes that could be introduced by the Scottish Parliament now without any additional powers.

**What should that third option be?**

Firstly, it must demand that the Scottish Government uses the powers that it already has to the benefit of working people. These chapters demonstrate that if there was the political will there is much that could be delivered with the existing powers.

It must ensure that Scotland has the powers to enhance, but not reduce, standards, rights and protections that are currently held by the UK Government.

It should have new powers in areas that would enable it to deal with some of its long-standing problems that impact on health, housing, jobs, and the environment. It should have power for a purpose.

There follows a series of chapters detailing what could make up a third option in any future referendum. The Red Paper Collective would aim to work with the trade union movement and campaigners to refine these demands and try to win support for allowing voters in Scotland a truly democratic choice about their future.